

Sponsor Testimony for HB 143

Volunteer First Responder Tax Credit

Representatives Candice Keller & Jack Cera

Chairman Schaffer, Vice Chair Lipps, Ranking Member Rogers, & members of the House Ways & Means Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on HB 143, the Ohio Volunteer First Responders Tax Credit. I believe that our volunteer first responders are truly our unsung heroes, providing a vital government function—the protection of life & property—for free or nominal compensation. My goal is to help show them our appreciation for their dedication, as well as incentivize further volunteerism.

Before I began research on this bill, I was unaware of the critical needs of those in the first responder community. It was not until I began to meet these men and women face-to-face that I truly saw their bravery, heroism, and their immense needs that go unmet. Many fire departments around our state face staffing shortages, broken or missing equipment, and in the case of volunteers—little to no compensation. Additionally, many areas that have volunteer peace officer programs are relying on these individuals to keep their communities safe under similar conditions.

HB 143 is truly a simple, straightforward bill. Essentially, the volunteer first responders will receive a refundable tax credit each year based on years of service. Those who serve between 1-5 years will be eligible for \$500/year off their taxes, 6-10 years of service will mean \$1000/year, and if the person has served 11 or more years, they will receive a \$2000 credit per year.

These tiers are in place in the bill for a very simple reason—longevity. There is great expense to these local departments, many of whom can't afford to be fully equipped, to equip and train their volunteers. To outfit one firefighter with the necessary gear is approximately \$4,500. The air packs that go with them are an additional \$7,000. Additionally, there is a great amount of time volunteers have to take off from their jobs and/or families to receive necessary trainings. Keep in mind, these volunteer first responders are required to receive the same amount of training as career first responders as they still need to be as competent in their job duties.

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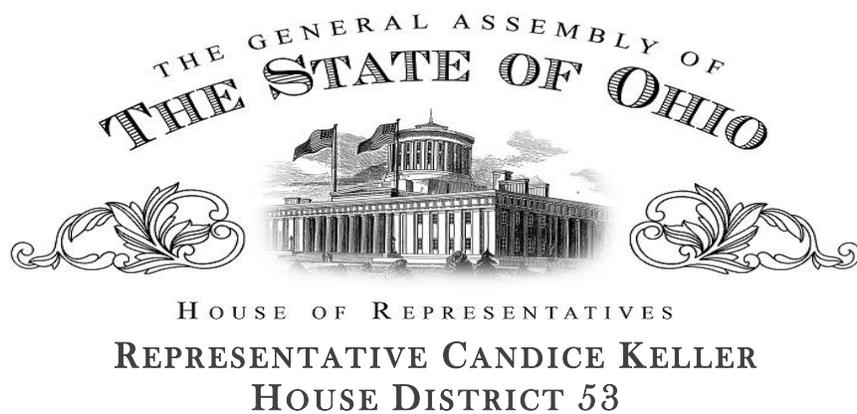
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Contact Information

Office: 614-644-5094

Email: Rep53@ohiohouse.gov



Then after all these expenses of time and money, it has become difficult to keep volunteers. According to the latest numbers from the Ohio Department of Public Safety, there has been a decrease of over 1,700 volunteers since 2013, leaving many fire departments in a bind. An example of this was a story conveyed to me by a fire chief from Adams County. They were responding to a structure fire in an Amish community, and it ended up that they required eight departments to send mutual aid to fight the blaze. Out of the nine departments total responding to that fire, there were only a total of 12 firefighters there to fight the blaze.

While one's mindset may be about the cost associated with such a tax credit, these volunteer first responders are actually saving the state money. They're performing a needed service to each of our constituents for free by always being there. The protection of our lives and property depends on these brave individuals, and I hope this bill can be a great start to improving their working conditions.

I am honored so many organizations have come out in support of this bill and pushed for its passage. We have received support from the Ohio Fire Chief's Association, Ohio Firefighters' Association, Buckeye Sheriff's Association, Brothers Helping Brothers, the Village of Botkins, OH, the Village of Georgetown, OH, as well as many more chiefs, lieutenants, and first responders across the Buckeye state.

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